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AUTHOR	Cheah, Yin Mee
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the language and literacy situation in Singapore looks at the role of each of the four official languages (English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and Malay) and at trends and issues in adult and vocational education for labor force development. Usage patterns of each official language, common dialects and varieties and their use, and the politics of language planning are outlined. The role of ethnic groups in determining language use is considered. Literacy patterns for each of the official languages are examined and factors affecting literacy are noted, including educational policy, social changes, development of the global marketplace, and historical and socioeconomic factors across and within language groups. The evolution and influence of public policy concerning bilingualism are noted. Vocational and adult education systems are described. Issues related to literacy and workforce development are explored, focusing on the two directions from which they are currently being addressed: the school curriculum, and adult and vocational education. Issues discussed include competition between languages, even within the school context, the effects of multilingualism, and the relevance to the workplace of the literacy skill being taught. Contains 27 references. (MSE)

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Yin Mee Cheah (Ph.D.)
School of Arts
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
469, Bukit Timah Road,
Singapore 259756

Tel: (65) 460-5090
Fax: (65) 469-8433
Email: cheahym@nievax.nie.ac.sg

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An Overview of Language and Literacy Issues in Singapore

Introduction

Singapore was a British colony from 1819 to 1963, and has been an independent nation since 1965 after a short but unsuccessful attempt at merger with Malaysia. A small island, (647.5 square kilometres) Singapore has a largely Chinese population, but is situated in a predominantly Muslim region in South East-Asia. It has a resident population of 2.9 million people, of which 78% are Chinese, 14% Malays, 7% Indians and 1% Others (Eurasians, Europeans and Arabs) (Source: *Singapore 1996*). The Singapore success story is well-known. Once, a " mosquito infested swamp dotted with pig and chicken farms, fishing villages, and squatter colonies of tinned roof shacks." (Sesser, 1993: 11) it has, in thirty years, become the ninth richest country in the world, and has achieved standards of living that are comparable to developed countries.

The social achievements in Singapore are also indisputable: a low crime rate, excellent housing and infrastructure, full employment, and an effective education system. Today, the struggle for economic survival has given way to a new goal of developing a gracious society in keeping with the material advancement enjoyed by all Singaporeans. In addition, increasing globalization and openness to the world has also brought about a concern with changes that can threaten the established social structure. Informational and technological advancement also mean that the society as a whole will enjoy uncontrolled access to information. The economy too must change to meet the keener competition that will arise from a global market that is driven by technology. Shifting demographics, characterised by a rapidly ageing population (by the year 2020, 30% of the total population will be above 60 years old), also has new implications for educational efforts. Education and worker training have been identified as priority concerns with the government as a strategy to deal with these changes. The education system has a role to meet the implications of these many changes, and Singapore's response is reflected in the recent shift of emphasis in education " away from a mastery of content towards the acquisition of thinking and learning skills" (Lee, quoted in Ho, 1996). Similarly, adult and vocational education, particularly worker training and re-training are urgent issues to be dealt with in order to maintain a competitive edge over other countries.

Against this brief description of Singapore's economic and social background, this paper will go on to describe the language situation in Singapore as a background to a discussion of the issues related to education and literacy in Singapore's four official languages. This paper aims to give an overview of some of the concerns of language education in the official languages, but central to the discussion are efforts made by the government to meet imminent changes in the global marketplace through literacy education. Mention will be made of efforts made in vocational and adult education to train and re-train the workforce to meet changing economic demands.

The language situation in Singapore

The ethnic diversity in Singapore means that linguistic diversity is inevitable, and the linguistic situation in Singapore is more diverse than its ethnic makeup, because each ethnic group includes several dialect groups. The 1980 census listed 20 specific "dialect groups" under the four major ethnic groups (Kuo and Jernudd, 1993), and Singapore has been described as a society with a language pattern involving " a variety of unrelated languages each with its own literacy tradition" (Rustow, cited in Kuo, 1985). In fact, each of the four official languages, English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay have native speakers and cultural communities elsewhere, outside of Singapore. Underlying these disparities in languages used are also religious, ethnic, and cultural differences.

The Chinese fall into ten dialect groups, the largest of which are Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka. The Indian dialects include Tamil, Malayam, Punjabi, Hindustani, Bengali and Gujerati. The Malays are more homogenous in language, culture, and religion although Javanese and Boyanese dialects are also used. Because of the presence of so many languages in Singapore, most Singaporeans have a verbal repertoire of several languages, among which are native dialects, Malay and English. For instance, Pakir (1993) showed that a typical Chinese-Singaporean undergraduate has a verbal repertoire that includes English, Mandarin and the native Chinese dialect. In addition, it may include another Chinese dialect, a foreign language (Japanese, French or German) and Malay.

Official Languages and Mother Tongues

Historically, English has been the official language of the government and of law and administration because of the British. While other languages existed and were used by the population, they remained peripheral with the exception of Bazaar Malay, a pidginized variety of Malay, which was used for inter-ethnic communication. At the time of Singapore's independence, four languages, English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and Malay were designated official languages with equal status, reflecting the government's policy of " pragmatic multilingualism" (Kuo and Jernudd, 1993, p. 4). The three ethnic languages were chosen to represent the ethnic diversity in Singapore while English was selected because it is an international language and is the language of trade, science and technology. Singapore's need to succeed and to develop economically after its independence made English all the more the pragmatic choice then. Malay was chosen to be the national language, and although English and Malay have been used as languages for inter-ethnic communication, Malay has, over the years, played a less significant role. Today, Malay is retained as a national language to maintain rapport with neighbouring states whose lingua franca is also Malay, but within Singapore, it has a largely ceremonial function.

Of the four official languages, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay are referred to as the official "mother tongues" (MT), and English is the "first language" (L1) in the context of schools. However, the manner in which these terms are used differs from their linguistic definitions. The "mother tongue" does not refer to the first language

acquired by the child. Pakir (1993: 24) described the use of this term in Singapore as one of "ascription and external identification" because two of the three official "mother tongues", Mandarin and Tamil, are not true mother tongues but are officially delegated to the Chinese and the Indian communities.

For most Chinese, the mother tongue is often one of many dialects, which can be mutually unintelligible while sharing the same written script. Mandarin was implemented as the mother tongue to provide a common language for all Chinese. Although the number of Chinese speaking Mandarin at home has increased over the years, this has been a direct result of the bilingual school policy and the various government campaigns. One example is the Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched in 1979. The campaign contributed to increasing the percentage of Chinese families using Mandarin as the predominant household language from 10.2% in 1980 to 26% in 1990. A corresponding decrease (from 59.5% to 36.7% in the same period) in the use of dialects (the true mother tongues)as the predominant household language was also observed (Department of Statistics, 1991). The continuing campaign to get all Chinese-Singaporeans to learn Mandarin is motivated, not only by historical and political reasons, but also by the promise of economic benefits from trade with a fast developing China. Nevertheless, this rapid growth in the use of Mandarin would not be possible without the support of the majority of Singaporeans who, for the sake of their children's education, embraced the policy without much dissent. The social costs, however, are less evident, although one obvious consequence is that a whole generation of young people has grown up with Mandarin and English, and they have no common language to communicate with their grandparents, most of whom are still dialect speaking. On the other hand, there have been cases where many grandparents have made the effort to learn Mandarin in order to maintain links with their grandchildren.

Among the Indians, Tamil is but one of the many dialects, and until recently, all Indian children regardless of dialect groups, studied Tamil, with some exceptions of students who offered Malay as a second language. Recent changes in policy, however, have allowed for several other minority languages to be offered in the examinations in place of the official mother tongue, Tamil. Among these are Punjabi, Bengali, Gujerati, Hindi and Urdu. These dialects again are mutually unintelligible, and have different non-alphabetic scripts. Although this policy is to help non-Tamil speaking students in the examinations, it also means that the Indian community, unlike the Chinese, will have no common language among them. Tamil, as a mother tongue of Indian Singaporeans has also shown a decline in use from 52% to 44% in the last ten years (Source: The Department of Statistics, 1991). This subtractive bilingualism is in part due to English (Saravanan, 1994), but the Tamil language has never enjoyed wide popularity, because only about half the individuals classified as Indians use the language in a significant way.

Only Malay among the official mother tongues can be regarded as the true mother tongue for most Malays do acquire the language first. There has been some language shift in recent years to English (from 96.7% in 1980 to 94.3% in 1990), but by and

large, because of the close relationship between language, culture, and religion, the Malay community has maintained its mother tongue.

English is similarly not a "first language" as in the first acquired language, but is more accurately described as the "first school language", although it does enjoy the status of a first language both in terms of prestige and usage. The importance of English can be seen from its many domains of use. Tay (1982) described these as the official language, the working language, the lingua franca, the expression of national identity, and the international language. In addition, it is also the language of religion as it is associated with Christianity, a religion of many upper middle-class Chinese (Clammer, quoted in Pennycook, 1994). The dominance of English in Singapore is one reason why it is often regarded as a 'Westernised' society, although the government would much prefer to emphasise its Asian characteristics.

The percentage of families using English has gone up over the last ten years, from 10.2% in 1980 to 21.4% in 1990. Significantly, at a household income level of $5000 and above, the percentages of use for English and Mandarin were 37.9% and 16.6% respectively, confirming the link between English with social status and prestige. Conversely, more lower income families used dialects and ethnic languages. For all ethnic groups, English is gaining ground at the expense of local languages, and this has undoubtedly raised concerns about deculturalization and language loss. The popularity of English is also related to the low social status and economic value of the ethnic languages, particularly Malay and Tamil.

Census figures, however, do not reveal the varieties of English that are used, and a range of proficiency can be found in these English-speaking families. The English spoken in Singapore ranges widely from the educated, British-influenced acrolectal speech of Senior Minister Lee and television newscasters to the colloquial, basilectal variety, known as Singlish, and this is widely spoken by less well-educated Singaporeans, as well as by all Singaporeans in informal situations. Needless to say, the less prestigious Singlish is not encouraged, and attempts to curb this variety include official policies limiting its use in the media. However, Singlish is still used in some popular writing, and on stage, and continues to be regarded as an expression of Singaporean identity.

Language Policy

Like other aspects of Singapore's government, language planning is also a top-down process with policies and goals made and articulated periodically by political leaders. There is no central language planning institute in Singapore, and policies are often made with some consultation with academics and other institutions. These consultations, however, are on a project by project basis and their impact on the policies is generally not known. Language planning in Singapore is concerned with language status, that is the choice and spread of particular varieties, among specific groups for specific functions. This is not unexpected since all the official languages have native speakers outside of Singapore; exonormative norms are thus adopted for all languages particularly the written forms. This policy is not without its problem though. For instance, while British English is the model chosen for educational

purposes, the mass media make available many varieties of English, and the gradual influence of American English in speech and spelling seems unavoidable.

As a multiethnic and multicultural society, issues of language are always political, and the government has always adopted a policy of equality for all languages, a strategy that has been in place since 1956 (Gopinathan , 1994: 66). However, a pragmatic policy was adopted to allow for continuing adjustments of language policies. For instance, the rationale offered for English has always been a utilitarian one; English is learnt for access to Western science and technology. Mother tongues however, are learnt for access to one's cultural heritage which is regarded as essential in view of the increasing dominance of English and the threat of Westernization and deculturalization. However, in recent years, English has taken on the role of the lingua franca and is now regarded by some academics as the language capable of forging a new multicultural Singaporean identity linked to the emergence of a Singapore culture (Benjamin, 1976: Koh, 1989; Pakir 1991). Thus while clear roles have been defined for the ethnic languages or mother tongues as well as for English, English is now beginning to be regarded as the bridge between the Eastern cultures as represented by the mother tongues and a new Singaporean culture that finds its manifestation in English.

In future, the policy of equality of languages is likely to remain, and the school bilingual policy emphasising the study of English and second languages is also likely to continue. The bilingual policy in Singapore is one that is based on English as the key language with the official mother tongues as the second language. Such English-knowing bilingualism (Pakir, 1991) already suggests that English is the premier language regardless of the push towards Mandarin or ethnic languages. Indeed, much of Singapore's continued stability will be based on its ability to maintain this policy of equality of language and to ensure that benefits accrue to the learning of these languages. The growing interest in China as well as the dominance of Mandarin in Singapore has led to increasing interest in Mandarin by other non- Chinese ethnic groups. In addition, there is also an increase in interest in foreign languages such as German, Japanese, and French, but these are not likely to have a great impact on the majority of the population.

Literacy Issues

Definitions

In Singapore, education is never an end in itself. Instead, education " ...provides not only quality manpower to forge our economic well-being, but is itself the glue which forms the social and cultural cohesion that is so critical to our multiracial society" (Yip, 1993:6). This dual objective of economic success and nation building is implicit in the bilingual policy of learning English and the mother tongues.

A well-educated and productive work force is essential to Singapore's economy as it moves into more value-added services and information industries. The government believes that a labour force with competent literacy skills is the key to maintaining an

economic edge in an increasingly competitive world. However, the level of literacy needed for such a purpose is not so easily determined.

The definition of literacy used in the census as " the ability to read with understanding, a newspaper in a certain language" (Tay, 1985) is definitely inadequate, especially when the government also hopes to encourage the habit of life-long learning and to move workers and citizens alike into the new information-driven society. This definition, however, is an improvement over the 1957's definition of literacy as " the ability to read and write a simple letter" reflecting an expected rise in literacy levels of the population over the years. However, both definitions are of a very low level, and are inadequate when used to define the levels of literacy achievement in schools. The Senior Minister of Education has questioned the limited definition of literacy and offered a new definition of biliteracy as the "skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and even thinking in two languages" (Wong, 1996:xiv). With this definition, she also linked biliteracy with "culture learning and the preservation of cultural values", an objective that is closely associated with mother tongue education.

Having said that, it must be conceded that literacy levels in Singapore have improved drastically over the last two to three decades. In 1980, the literacy level was 84%, and the rate went up to 90% in 1990. Of this figure, 47% are literate in two or more languages, an increase from 39% in 1980, and this can be attributed to the bilingual programme in the schools.

The next sections will discuss some of the issues related to literacy in the four official languages. The discussion is largely focused on school literacy as opposed to workplace literacy, although the latter is also included. These two areas of literacy tend not to overlap in Singapore where the predominant emphasis has always been on school and academic literacy. Vocational education has been less prestigious until recent years, and this has partly to do with the stress and support given by the government and the many success stories coming from the polytechnics. Adult and vocational education are not directly under the purview of the Ministry of Education, and this has also contributed to a neglect by academics and researchers in education to investigate issues related to this field and to the students.

Literacy in English

The demise of vernacular schools and the demand for an English education in the 1980s is a clear indication of the value of English literacy in Singapore. A study by Das and Crabbe (1984) looking into the needs of workers attending the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) classes revealed that workers regarded learning English as an important long-term investment for self-advancement, a view that employers agreed with.

In schools, English literacy continues to dominate the curriculum, and the acquisition of English literacy is essential as a subject as well as for the learning of other subjects. Reading and writing skills in English are fundamental in the study of Science and Mathematics and the other school subjects.

In a recent study of reading ability by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Elley, 1992), Singapore students scored well despite the fact that they were instructed and tested in a non-native language, English. The tests, which included the reading of documents and expository and narrative texts, were given to two populations of 9 year-olds and 14 year-olds. Despite this success, there has been concern about the falling standards in English because the bilingual policy requires students to divide their attention between two languages from day one of their school career.

From the mid-1980s, there have been attempts to improve the curriculum and the teaching and learning of English. This was partly in response to an earlier study by Ng (1980) which showed that the teaching of reading in the lower primary classes was less than satisfactory, and that children were having problems learning to read. Several language projects were introduced after this study, and they included the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP), the Active Communicative Teaching Programme (ACT) in the primary schools, and the Project to Assist Selected Schools on English Skills (PASSES) in the secondary schools. These projects culminated in the production of a new syllabus for English language in 1991 and new textbooks for the schools.

The new English language syllabus brought about several important changes to literacy education here(Cheah, 1996). For instance, the previous structural syllabus which emphasised the learning of grammatical items, has been replaced by a thematic syllabus which stresses the learning of language through various themes. More important, the philosophy of language learning has changed from a functional literacy and academic learning emphasis to one that values personal growth and the use of language as a thinking tool. In addition, critical and creative thinking has been introduced into the syllabus to encourage students to become more independent learners with a range of flexible skills . Computers, CDROM software, the Internet, and assorted multimedia materials are all part of $2 billion information technology plan to bring computer literacy into the school curriculum in a bid to improve teaching and learning (" $2b IT plan to revolutionise learning unveiled", *The Straits Times*, 29 April 1997). These innovations, to be introduced through English literacy, are part of the larger objective to prepare the population for the challenges that will arise with the impending change in market economies.

The teaching and learning situation, however, remains fairly complex because of a number of factors. For instance, many of the children in mission schools use English regularly and English can be described as their mother tongue. The standard of English in these schools is thus higher than in most of the government schools where the majority of the students are from non-English speaking homes. For these students, English can range from a second to a foreign language, and this makes the teaching and learning of English more challenging. The situation is not helped by the fact that English is regarded as a first language in Singapore, a confusing misnomer since it is not truly a first language by acquisition for the majority of Singaporeans, but is instead the first school language.

Over the years, the perception has been that the standard of English taught, as reflected by the contents of the school textbooks, has risen. The current textbooks for primary schools, for instance, are not graded by readability levels unlike the previous sets of textbooks, and are conceptually more difficult because of the extensive cultural knowledge required to understand the texts provided. On the whole, it is difficult to say what level of English is being taught here - English as a second language (ESL) or English as a first language (EL1) (see Pakir, 1993:213). One thing is certain though, and that is the strategies used for teaching are increasingly borrowed from native English-speaking contexts into Singapore, and that the teaching is moving more and more towards a holistic approach typical of native English-speaking countries.

Yet another area of concern in English literacy has to do with the fact that English is a non-native language, and that the learning of the language cannot be divorced from the learning of the culture associated with the language. The fear of deculturalization was a constant theme of the ruling government, and Prime Minister Lee referred to this when he said that, " we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about, and what we want to do" (cited in Gopinathan, 1980:192). The emphasis on the learning of mother tongues is a direct result of this concern, and although this theme of deculturalization has given way to other concerns today, there is still the nagging question of how much of a threat English literacy is to ethnic culture and values.

On the other hand, English is increasingly seen as the new lingua franca, the bridge language in this multilingual and multiethnic society. English has been regarded by some academics as the language which unites Singaporeans, and capable of evolving a Singaporean consciousness and identity in its new role (Koh,1989; Pakir,1991; Benjamin, 1976). There is as yet, not enough evidence to support this claim. Recent reference to the role of English as the "common working language" (" Use of English makes for a level playing field, says PM Goh", *The Straits Times*, 1 January 1997) reinforces the political role English plays in the country as a social equaliser, and this is an important consideration in Singapore's meritocratic system. The learning of English gives all Singaporeans an opportunity to compete equally, and this is a view that Prime Minister Goh suggested when he said that "... we are all equal, because we all have this knowledge of English" (ibid.).

Literacy in the mother tongues

Many of the changes in the English curriculum eventually find their way into the mother tongue curriculum. For example, the use of Big Books in the primary school was introduced in the teaching of Malay language, and the thematic approach to language teaching has been adopted into the Chinese and Tamil syllabus. The innovations in school, viz., critical and creative thinking and the use of IT will eventually find their way into the mother tongue curriculum too, but the pace will certainly be much slower given that the purpose of mother tongue education is still largely for cultural and value education. Nevertheless, as official second languages, mother tongue education is not without its problems, particularly when viewed in a context where the learning of the first language is often regarded as more important

because all of the other subjects are taught in English. The motivation to learn the mother tongues is, by and large, still driven by examination requirements and the need to get a good grade for promotion into the next level of school.

Literacy in Chinese

Although mother tongue education begins at the same time as English education on day one of the primary school, the amount of time allotted to it is 27% compared to the 33% for English. This time allocation is significant because it shows that mother tongue education is an important component of the education curriculum. Within the school, separate periods are set aside for mother tongue education, and moral education is also taught in the mother tongue at the primary school level.

The British did little to promote the learning of mother tongues during their rule as they were more interested in an English-educated population to serve their administrative needs. Although Chinese, like English and the other mother tongues, is regarded as an official language in Singapore, interest in English surged as a result of the phenomenal economic development that took place in the seventies. English is learnt for the utilitarian purpose of obtaining employment and the social mobility that comes with good jobs. The demand for English resulted in a decline in enrolment in Chinese-medium schools. At the university level, 60 percent of all the courses conducted at the Chinese-medium Nanyang University were in English by 1977. By 1980, the fate of Nanyang University was sealed when it was decided that the new University of Singapore campus at Kent Ridge (subsequently renamed the National University of Singapore) was to be the only comprehensive university in Singapore. A national system of education using English as the first language was put in place by 1987.

The teaching of Chinese in the late 1960s and seventies was generally "unsatisfactory" (Ang, 1994). The national pass rate was below 50%, and this led to the first comprehensive survey on the teaching of Chinese in 1969/1970. Among other findings, the survey found that the teaching time for Chinese was too little. In the period from the 1970s to the 1980s, several measures were taken to rectify the teaching of Chinese. These included the promotion of the use of hanyu pinyin and the use of simplified Chinese characters, the compiling of Chinese character lists, and the development of new instructional materials.

The Goh report of 1978 suggested that the bilingual policy had been ineffective, and one result of that was the Speak Mandarin campaign launched in 1979. This campaign was aimed at getting more Chinese to use Mandarin as their home language instead of dialects as a study showed that students speaking dialects at home tended to do worse in Chinese than those speaking Mandarin or English (cited in Ang, 1994: 325). That this campaign had some success can be seen from the statistic suggesting that 68% of the Primary 1 cohort in 1987 came from Mandarin-speaking homes (*The Straits Times*, 8 October 1987, quoted in Ang, 1994).

In 1991, a top level Chinese Language Review Committee was set up to study ways to improve the teaching of Chinese. Among the findings presented to the Ministry of Education were the following:

- CL1 was renamed Higher Chinese and CL2 was changed to Chinese language to raise the status and profile of Chinese language teaching and learning from its second language status
- The development of new CL syllabuses and the update of existing Chinese character lists
- Equal exposure time to EL and CL for Chinese children in pre-schools and kindergartens
- The preparation of new instructional materials and the formation of a council to develop and promote CL supplementary materials.
- The setting up a language centre for the professional upgrading of Chinese language teachers.
- The revision of CL examination format with more emphasis given to listening and reading comprehension.

1991 also saw the establishment of the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) to help develop programmes to improve the education and welfare of the Chinese community. Other community-based self-help groups include the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Council for the Education of Muslim children (MENDAKI).

Literacy in Tamil

As one of the official languages in Singapore, the Tamil language enjoys legal and institutional support from the government. For instance, Tamil is learnt by all Tamils[1] as the official second language in schools, and Tamil is used in the government services, in the media, in schools, as well as in other cultural institutions in the country. Teacher education is available for the training of Tamil language teachers, and Tamil materials are published for schools. However, despite this, statistics from the census suggest that over the last ten years, there has been a steady decline in the use of Tamil in the Indian community. Instead, English is growing in popularity as the preferred language in the Indian community. The 1990 census figures showed that Tamil, as the predominant language in Indian households, fell from 52.6% in 1980 to 43.7% in 1990. 64% of the Indians in Singapore are Tamil-speaking.

The lack of interest in Tamil has been attributed to historical factors as well as socio-economic factors (Mani & Gopinathan, 1983; Saravanan, 1994). Tamil does not have the status and significance of English, Chinese, or even Malay in the society, as Indians only form 6% of the population. The learning of English is often seen by Indians as the key to social mobility and status in society. In school, the existence of a higher and lower variety of Tamil also contributes to the learning problem. The higher or the literary variety tends to be favoured in schools, and this has resulted in an overemphasis on drills and rote learning of forms that are not used in everyday

[1] Recent changes in policy have also allowed for other minority Indian languages such as Punjabi, Bengali, Gujerati, Hindi, and Urdu to be offered as mother tongues in schools in place of Tamil.

Tamil. Thus the language is not taught for communicative purposes, and children are not able to transfer what is learnt in schools to their homes and community. According to Saravanan (ibid.), this formal version is also prevalent in the media; this further discourages the use of everyday Tamil and sets up formal Tamil as the preferred model.

Thus on the whole, while Tamil enjoys some community support for social and recreational purposes, it remains essentially a classroom language among the younger generation of Indians. The inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic language continues to be English. The choice of English is a rational choice dictated by economics, and the survival of the language is contingent upon an increase in its use at home by members of the community.

Literacy in Malay

Although Malay has been used as a medium of education in Malaya, it was less popular in Singapore until the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power in 1959. Historically, however, Malay has been the lingua franca in Singapore. The interest in a merger with the Federation of Malaya prompted the party to make Malay the national language. For instance, government school teachers were required to pass Standard 1 Malay to qualify for confirmation in service while Standard II Malay was required of civil servants. The working language for the government, however, has always been English. The sixties was the period that Malay received the most attention; there were Malay lessons in the newspapers, in the media, and Malay was used in public notices and directives from the government (Bibi, 1994).

After Singapore's independence in 1965, Malay continued as one of the official languages, but its use and importance decreased especially when it was not promoted as a major medium of instruction in schools. In the community, Malay continued to serve an inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic function, particularly the pidginised version known as Bazaar Malay.

Today, Malay is still the official national language although its use is strictly ceremonial. Within the community, English has replaced Malay as the language for intra-ethnic communication, while in the Malay community, there has been a slight language shift in favour of English. The 1990 census for instance showed that there was an increase from 2.3% to 5.5% of Malay families using English at home.

Despite this shift, Malay families are more consistent in their use of Malay at home compared to the Chinese and the Indians. In school, Malay students learn Malay as a second language, but Malay literature is not emphasised. This meant that the role of Malay as the vehicle for the transmission of cultural values is correspondingly reduced, as the language is now merely learnt for communication only and used largely in the home domain (Bibi, 1994). The competition from English also means that young Malays are choosing to use English over Malay, and this has reduced their competence in the language. There has been concern over code-switching between English and Malay and the lack of interest, especially among the young, in the literary

aspects of the Malay language. Bibi reported that many young Malays are only capable of a restricted code instead of an elaborated one when using the language.

The bilingual policy, with its emphasis on ethnicity as the basis for selecting a mother tongue, has also dealt a blow to the learning of the Malay language. Before this, many Chinese, particularly the Straits-born Chinese who speak Malay at home, chose to learn Malay in school as did many non-Tamil Indians like the Sikhs, Punjabis and the Malayalees. With the bilingual policy, these people had to take their ethnic Chinese or Tamil languages (recently, non-Tamil speaking Indians were also allowed to learn their own mother tongues) thus reducing the demand for Malay in school. This also effectively reduced the number of people speaking the language in the community. The national system of education with English as the medium of instruction also contributed to the demise of Malay schools.

Vocational and adult education

Continuing education for workers and other school leavers was provided by the Vocational and Industrial training Board (VITB). For example, the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) programme was started in 1983 to raise workers' standard of English and Mathematics to the equivalent of Primary 6 (the end of primary education). By the end of 1995, 90% or 197,000 workers out of a target of 225,000 workers have participated in the programme. Those who complete this course can move on to secondary level courses such as the Worker Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE) or skills courses in the VITB's Continuing Education and Training (CET) programme. Other popular training courses include Modular Skills Training (MOST) which offers 46 courses in technical skills, Training Initiative for Mature Employees (TIME) which aims to certify the skills of those with experience but no qualifications, Adult Co-operative Training Scheme (ACTS) which is a Time programme for 20 to 40 year old workers who are unskilled or have low skills and have educational qualifications below GCE "O" levels, and Fast Forward which teaches new skills through videotapes, easy-to-read books as well as tutorials.

Changes to vocational education were introduced after the release of the 1991 report on *Improving Primary School Education* (IPSE) in line with the recommendations from the report. As a result, students will now have a minimum of 10 years of general education instead of 6, and the provision of technical education in the normal stream at the secondary school level meant that students are better prepared for vocational education. As a result, vocational education was revamped with the aim of helping learners achieve higher skills, offering more occupational choices to students as well as more opportunities for progression to further education and training (VITB Report, 1991).

Vocational education is now a post-secondary programme taking those with GCE "O" or "N" level results. Full-time vocational education and apprenticeship schemes are offered to these students while those with lower qualifications will be admitted to the less demanding certificate courses only. Students graduating from the higher level courses can be admitted to the Polytechnics for relevant diploma courses. In line with this, all vocational institutes under the VITB were renamed Technical Institutes

to reflect the change to a higher level of training. VITB itself has been renamed the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

Three polytechnics have been set up to cater to the technical, business and design education at the tertiary levels. Students with "O" or "A" levels as well as graduates from technical institutes can apply to these polytechnics.

Working adults in non-blue collar jobs are not left out of the drive to upgrade skills and qualifications. A number of part-time courses are available through the universities (including the Open University), the polytechnics, the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), and a host of other establishments to allow working adults to pursue courses that will lead to higher qualifications and skills.

Issues of concern

Given the concern with human resources and the need to develop the skills of Singaporeans so that they remain competitive in the workforce, a major issue of concern lies in the upgrading of skills of the population. This is being tackled at two ends. One from the perspective of the current school curriculum, and the other through post-school education for adults and workers.

School Literacy

Within the school curriculum, mention has already been made of the government's efforts to improve teaching and learning in the curriculum. However, there are other issues which I will describe here. Generally, the main concern in language and literacy education in Singapore is two-fold. One is the maintenance and achievement of a high level of proficiency in the languages, and the other, more specific to mother tongues, is the issue of language maintenance in face of increasing competition from English. The bilingual policy has also led to competition between English and mother tongues, particularly Mandarin, in schools. Globally, the emerging importance of China as a world power and locally, the increasing popularity of Mandarin programmes and Mandarin-speaking television celebrities, has given Mandarin a boost in terms of popularity and prestige. The Speak Mandarin campaign has also resulted in a generation of bilingual young Singaporeans who often prefer to speak Mandarin in schools rather than English. It is not uncommon to hear teachers in schools complaining that the Chinese students speak more Mandarin than they do English.

This does create a paradox in schools where students are, on the one hand, encouraged to maintain their ethnic language and identity, but are, on the other hand, simultaneously reminded that the most important language in school is English. The compartmentalisation of mother tongues and English by their respective functions (English for economic and social mobility, mother tongues for culture and value transmission) is meant to give the teaching and learning of these languages clear objectives, but as always, languages resist compartmentalisation by function and use. The impact of literacy in a non-native first language on the learning of the mother tongues and vice versa is as yet unclear. Are students burdened by the learning of two languages, and has this affected the standards of language achievement of students?

But given that language proficiency is the most significant component of the education system, it is inevitable that there will be continual emphasis on language teaching and learning. Apart from the pedagogical concerns, the emphasis on education as the way to social and economic mobility also means that there is interest in finding out if schools are equipping students adequately for the workplace. What gaps exist between school and workplace literacy? While English continues to reign supreme as the premier language, what is the impact of literacy in a non-native language on issues of personal, ethnic, and national identity? Is there any conflict in developing literacy in two unrelated languages for children, not only from a cognitive perspective but also from a social-cultural point of view?

Adult and vocational education

The training and re-training of workers in the workforce to ensure that they retain a competitive edge remains the most urgent concern. Singapore's labour force has been voted the best in the world by the United States-based Business Environment Risk Intelligence (BERI), a position it held since 1995 ("Beri rates Singapore workers tops-again", *The Straits Times*, 7 April, 1997). However, Singapore workers were ranked third in worker attitude after Japan and Switzerland, and they also fared poorly in the area of technical skills scoring 95 points below countries like Denmark, Switzerland, Japan, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden all of whom, except Denmark, scored 100 marks in this category. This is not unexpected since some 40% of Singapore's workers have not gone through secondary education, although the percentage of workers who have received training has gone up from 6.25% in 1995 to 12.5% in 1996 ("Focus on Singapore's workers", *The Straits Times*, 1 May 1997). The amount of money put into training has also gone up from 2% of the payroll in 1992 to 3.6% of the payroll in 1997. For example, in December last year, the National Trade Union's Congress, the Productivity and Standards Board, the Economic Development Board, and the Institute of Technical Education launched the Skills Redevelopment programme as a pilot programme for about 1,500 workers in manufacturing. More recently, the Economic Development Board launched the Specialist Manpower Programmes (SMP) to train workers with specific and specialist skills that are needed in the changing economy.

Although the government is focused and dedicated to retraining, not all Singaporeans are keen on retraining. Older workers, for instance, quote the lack of time (most are busy doing two jobs to make ends meet), the lack of a need as well as the lack of English as reasons for not wanting to be retrained. A survey by the National Productivity Board in 1989 quoted in the Straits Times, revealed that half the workers between 40 and 50 are illiterate in English, and since courses are always conducted in English, this effectively discourages participation by this group. The recent changes to the school system which ensures that school leavers will have a minimum of 10 years education will go along way in ensuring that school leavers will have basic literacy in English for future job training and retraining. Although workplace literacy is an urgent issue, there has been little research into the literacy skills needed for the workplace nor into how well school literacy practices are preparing students for the demands of the workplace.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to provide a broad overview of the language situation in Singapore as a background to contextualising the issues related to language and literacy education in the four official languages in Singapore. In the course of the discussion, I have also attempted to include issues related specifically to vocational and adult education. Although the latter is the focus of this seminar, school literacy is still the central focus in this paper because it is the solid grounding in literacy skills while at school that will provide the future worker with the capability to continue learning on the job. Many of the problems with adult education and worker retraining in Singapore stem from workers who have inadequate literacy skills to be trained or retrained. But while the school literacy programmes and the general education system as a whole have been effective and have contributed to academic success so far, there is a growing realisation that much more needs to be done to prepare the population for the next millennium. The current initiatives in school and in the workplace by various government agencies are steps towards meeting the new challenges and imminent changes.

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